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USTR Calls for Additional Progress on WTO Transparency

United States Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky today urged the World Trade Organization to take further steps to make its activities and procedures more open and accessible, both for smaller WTO member delegations and for the public at large.

“We believe that there are several practical steps the WTO can take right now to make itself a more inclusive and transparent institution,” said Ambassador Barshefsky. “These and other steps are critical to the WTO’s long-term credibility in the eyes of both its own membership and of the public at large.”

Last month, USTR sent a letter to the Chairman of the WTO General Council in Geneva outlining a series of suggestions on how the organization could improve upon its “external” and “internal” transparency in light of the growth in WTO membership and the increasing complexity of issues on the WTO’s agenda. These and other ideas were discussed at an informal meeting of the General Council last week, and are the subject of ongoing consultations.

On the external side, the United States urged such steps as: expanding the range of WTO documents available to the public; strengthening the guidelines for consultations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs); enhancing the WTO’s program of symposia and consultations on specific subjects; expanding the use of Internet facilities to reach more stakeholders, including small and medium-sized enterprises; and broadening the range of WTO meetings and events that would be open to the public.

The United States also suggested that the WTO make internal improvements to consult more fully and increase the flow of information to all 135 members. The United States asked its WTO partners to consider practical ideas for consultations, scheduling, and structuring work to maximize knowledge of WTO activities and to help smaller delegations, in particular, participate more effectively in such work.

In 1996, the WTO’s General Council took two decisions aimed at increasing the public

availability of WTO documents and facilitating the WTO's interaction with interested NGOs. Based on experience gained over the past four years, the United States hopes that both decisions can be updated to enable the WTO's relationship with the public to be further enriched and invigorated.

In addition to these actions, the United States has also been pressing to make the WTO's dispute settlement process more transparent by opening panel hearings to the public and permitting stakeholders to file amicus briefs.